

HOMER GARDEN CLUB

Newsletter

February 2012

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The February meeting will be held February 26 at 2:00 p.m. at the Bidarka Inn, downstairs.

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February 26, 2012 Meeting Will Feature Grafting Tomato Plants & Growing Peonies

Joseph Belcastro has been an avid gardener for over 30 years. He started when he was young with peach trees and grapevines in his back yard, processing peaches and making grape juice with his mom and grandmother. His dad and grandfather enjoyed planting annual vegetable gardens as well and he learned many gardening skills from them. For twenty years, Joseph gardened intensively in central Pennsylvania in an intentional community which practiced organic gardening methods. He also grew cut flowers for local commercial florists for about five years. Joseph and his wife moved to Homer ten years ago and continued gardening here – after a rapid learning curve. Last year, he was able to offer CSA boxes of organic veggies to

friends and neighbors.



tomato plants in order to boost yield and add resistance to soil-borne pathogens. Joseph will have photos of tomato vines of the same varieties that show the difference between grafted and non-grafted plants. He'll also discuss the technique for grafting and how to build a simple healing chamber.

Rita Jo Shoultz of Fritz Creek Gardens started growing peony for the retail

trade in 1996. In 2006 she started growing peony by the thousands for the commercial cut flower market. She quickly discovered her 10 years of retail growing had very little to do with

growing peony in a field, in a farm scenario. Six years later she has gone full circle, thinking like a gardener, but on a larger scale. Rita Jo says "You have to live with these guys (peony) for a while to get to really know them. They are just like people. The varieties have their own personalities and growing preferences, and sometimes they can all get a bit grumpy if they don't like their diets. You have to invest the time and energy to make friends and you have to be flexible and open to new ideas."

Rita Jo, her husband Leroy and son Shannon now have 12,000 peony in the field and are enjoying the life of farmers very much. Rita Jo still owns and operates Fritz Creek Gardens and still loves all of the over 500 varieties of trees, shrubs, roses, vines, and perennials she offers. However, when asked what she liked best she always says "the people."

Rita Jo will be speaking about her experiences in growing peonies for commercial sale, along with tips for the home gardener growing them.





Tim Meyers to Speak at Special Meeting March 11

On March 11 from 2:00 to 4:00 at the Bidarka Inn, the Homer Garden Club is thrilled to be able to offer you an opportunity to listen to Tim Meyers, an amazingly innovative farmer from Bethel, as he explains his techniques for growing vegetables in the Kuskokwim Valley.

Meyers is especially known for his greenhouse/high tunnel innovations. He often continues growing in the wintertime *under* his greenhouses in the thawed permafrost. At



first he only intended to grow good food for his family, but that quickly changed. Last year he grew 8,000 pounds of potatoes, 10,000 pounds of onions and leeks, along with peppers, cabbage, cucumbers, garlic, zucchini, artichokes and turkeys. He is actually *exporting* produce to Anchorage.

Years ago he took the master gardener classes in Fairbanks and was told that gardening most likely wouldn't be very successful in Bethel. What he discovered was that the soil in Bethel is perfect for

growing vegetables. While the temperatures in Bethel are less than



ideal, Meyers has learned how to deal with that by using hoop houses and other warming methods. He even believes there is an advantage to the chilliness — that it makes everything taste a little sweeter.



President's Report

by Jack Regan, President

THE PUZZLING PARADOX OF BLUEBERRIES

The areas around Kachemak Bay are known to produce patches of luxuriant growth of delicious blueberries. Some of these patches are in remote sites reachable by a boat ride followed by a hike. In spite of this growth, many gardeners have been unsuccessful in their attempts to cultivate blueberries in their home gardens.

A preliminary review of Alaska Gardening manuals and attending gardening lectures has not provided an explanation of this failure. Growing blueberries could have considerable economic and/or food sustainability value.

to an article titled "*Blueberry Trials on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula First Year Report*", which was published in the newsletter found on the website www.alaskaberries.com. Brian Olson is the proprietor of Alaska Ber-



one of the sites of a blueberry study organized by Danny Barney, USDA, Subarctic Plant Gene Bank. The article is well designed and well written and very informative. Several blueberry cultivars were included. The horticulture investigators measured several variables, including soil pH, and concentrations of phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen. Serial soil and air temperatures were also monitored. Planting techniques and plant management were discussed. The outcome measurements included survival rate, fruit yield, berry size, and quality.

The study results demonstrated that blueberries can successfully be cultivated on the Kenai Peninsula, and that good quality fruit can be produced. For details read Dr. Barney's report in the newsletter.

I would like to direct your attention

ries Farm located between Soldotna and Kenai. His farm was



By now we have all heard about the avalanches and dealt with more snow than we can shovel off our brains. The take-home message: when avalanches close our roads, our stores generally have a three days' supply on hand. How long can you go without restocking from the store? If it were a big earthquake, of course, it could be much longer. A good learning exercise is to keep lists and work up to going shopping just once a month. You figure out what is essential pretty quick and learn what you need to be stocked with. Having some type of root cellar for cold storage, along with your canned and frozen food, can go a long way towards making you self-reliant. You'll find later that you don't need to shop that often, and you'll eat much healthier if you grew it or it's local. Then, during the next snowstorm, you can stay home and enjoy it.

Deppe. It's inspired me to start a Seed Saving, Education, Exchange group in Homer. Up until a few decades ago, everyone saved their own seeds. We can do this! A lot of our cultivars (plants selected for desirable characteristics that can be maintained by propagation) can be successfully saved here. We can



Saving Seeds

reeducate and experiment ourselves to come up with some better locally adapted varieties over

time. With our high tunnels experiments we can push this even farther. Education, fun, resilience, save \$ and eat your mistakes!

tests later and give them out to all who want to try them. Last fall I saved several varieties of our tomato seeds, parsnip and fava beans. I could have easily saved some green bean and snow pea seeds, as well as acorn and spaghetti squash seeds. In our root cellar the cabbage, beets, carrots, leeks and rutabagas (with roots on them) can all be planted in our high tunnel for seed saving this fall. They will be my high tunnel flower garden when they bloom. I'll really look forward to the results and maybe some big surprises when they mature...

Does anyone have any experience (good or bad) in saving seeds or want to learn? If so contact me at neil@sustainablehomer.org.

Carol's website is a wealth of information and her book is a good start. <http://www.caroldeppe.com/index.html> -She also has a number of other interesting books.

Upon the recommendations of Midge, (an experienced and enthusiastic seed saver lady from Kodiak), I started reading a very empowering book called Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties by Carol

Last month I cut up and cooked a couple of our blue Hubbard squash and pumpkin that were starting to mold in the root cellar. I washed and saved about a hundred seeds from each to dry. I'll do germination

Great news! Tim Meyers will be our March 11th HGC speaker. Note: it will be our regular 2 -4 pm time slot, but on the 2nd Sunday. Brenda Adams will be the March 26th speaker on Garden Landscape Design.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

— The Paul Banks Elementary PTA, along with staff and students is planning a Spring Fundraiser. Starter flowers planted by students in each classroom will be sold to parents and community members at the school in May. Any expertise that can be offered by the Garden Club members on starting flowers, time frames for planting, what type, etc. would be greatly appreciated.

— The Visitor Center Garden Committee met in January and discussed a landscaping design and plantings. It is hoped to have work days in conjunction with Homer's May clean-up day. Anyone interested in helping with the work or planning for this garden, please sign up at the meeting February 26 and we will contact you.



Joseph Belcastro's 15.6 oz. "Big Bertha" tomato

Rita Jo Shoultz's peony bouquet





Treasurer's Report

by Peggy Craig,

January 2012

Income

Membership		\$165.00
	Total Income	<u>\$165.00</u>

Expenses

Meeting		355.98
Venue	100.00	
Program	248.00	
Refreshments	7.98	
Newsletter		34.99
	Total Expenses	<u>\$390.97</u>

Beginning balance 1/1/12		\$12,754.72
Income	165.00	
Expenses	<u>-390.97</u>	
Ending balance 1/31/12		<u>\$12,528.75</u>



High Tunnel Growing Class

by Kyra Wagner

From February 3-5, the Kachemak Bay Campus hosted Dr. Jeff Smeenk and Ellen Vande Visse to teach a course on high tunnel growing. Much like a Master Gardeners class on steroids, the instructors tried to cover everything from site preparation to soil amendments to pests to cover crops. One of the best parts about the class was listening to the stories and experiences of the more than 30 participants. Five people came down from Kenai, one person had lost his high tunnel to snow load, some had purchased the high tunnel but had yet to plant in it, and others were still just in the dreaming stage. Everyone had ideas and experiences to add to the information that was presented and connections were made that will last even after the instructors have gone. Just to tickle your interest a bit, I'll include some of the links that were discussed as resources. There's a lot out there!

Tools

Small Farm Works: The most interesting small scale planter ever <http://smallfarmworks.com/>

The Rogue Hoe: Any farm/garden hoe or rake you can imagine <http://www.roguehoe.com/>

Farm Hack: A forum for sharing tools and innovations <http://www.youngfarmers.org/practical/farm-hack/about/>

Business

Managing Cover Crops Successfully: <http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books/Managing-Cover-Crops-Profitably-3rd-Edition>

New England Small Farm Institute: <http://www.smallfarm.org/>

More Learning Resources

The Practical Farmers of Iowa: <http://practicalfarmers.org/farminar/index.html>

ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for rural Areas): <https://attra.ncat.org/>



Many gardeners in Homer enjoy the benefits and antics of a flock of backyard chickens. Like companion planting in a garden bed, chickens are the perfect companions for the gardener – they thrive on kitchen scraps and freshly pulled weeds, they eat troubling insects, and they produce the kick-start for great compost. On top of that they provide exceptionally tasty eggs!

But in the dead of winter there are no garden scraps for a flock of hens to scratch through, no bugs to chase down, and stalagmites form under their roost bars. Our trudge through blowing snow and deep cold out to the coop twice a day to replace a bowl of ice with a bowl of warm water and a big scoop of expensive rations can be disheartening. Especially when as many days as not the nest box is empty, or the



one egg you do find has frozen and is cracked down its length.

This January was particularly cold and snowy, and I began to wonder what tricks other folks were using to keep their birds happy and boost egg production. So, drawing upon the networking skills of Neil Wagner, I put out a short chicken questionnaire.

My objective was to try to determine which bird varieties continue to lay despite the cold weather, and if some varieties in their second winter continue to lay well in this

unusually cold weather. The gist of the questions went like this:



What breed or breeds of chickens do you have? How many birds do you have, how old are they, and how many eggs have they averaged each week over the past month? (December 21 – January 20)

Six people responded, and their comments (which I've high-graded and edited gently for your reading pleasure) were delightful and insightful.

- Mostly Blackstars (13, I think), two elderly Buff Orpingtons, two light Brahma pullets, two mongrel pullets, one speckled Sussex (who wouldn't lay an egg if her life depended on it) and one very gentlemanly white rock rooster. We gave them a light around the end of December, and the egg laying picked up from four or five per day to around ten or eleven per day. Since the beginning of January, we have probably collected over 200 eggs.

Chickens need fresh air and good ventilation far more than they need heat--if you feed them properly; they make their own heat. We give them lots of local hay to scratch around in, and we throw a few handfuls of cracked corn down for them to hunt for--they love the corn, and the activity is proba-

bly good for them. Long ago I worked with a guy who was a pretty good farmer. He once told me, "If you want your hens to lay for you in the winter, give them warm water every day." So I give them a couple of gallons of hot water (which keeps their water from freezing during the day) every morning. If you let them go without food or water for a full day, you will notice fewer eggs the following day.

I think there are two factors that are influencing our egg production (which is about the best winter laying we've ever had). One is the Blackstars--they are surely the best layers I've ever seen. They started laying in August of 2011, and they popped out almost an egg per bird per day for most of the laying cycle. As soon as they finished molting after their first cycle, they went back into busi-



ness at almost the same rate as before. The other is the rooster--he is a very nice bird whose only concern in life is the welfare of his hens, with whom he is gentle and gallant. The hens, in response, are plainly very fond of him, and I think he contributes strongly to a social environment that promotes vigorous egg laying.

(Continued on page 6)

Chickens in Winter

(Continued from page 5)

- 2 Speckled Sussex and 2 Dorkings (very friendly and mellow chickens, especially the rooster). Born in the spring of 2011. One to three eggs every day.

- 1 Leghorn, 2 Road Island Reds, 4 Ameracauna (all 20 months), 3 mix, 2 Black Sex-links, 2 Gold Sex-links, 1 mix bantam (all 8 months), and 4 Silkies (6 months to 2 years). Averaged 50 eggs/week standard, 10/week bantams.

I know we all love the heritage breeds and want birds that look different, but if the objective is eggs, I have had the best production from the Sex-links. They are also winter hardy, and are the first to lay eggs.

- We have five hens. The four year old doesn't lay at all. The four others (Easter Egger, Black Australope, Buff Orpington, and Barred Rock) were spring chickens in 2010. The Easter Egger has quit laying altogether - and she was a machine in the summer. The

Barred Rock is very infrequent - maybe once a week. The Orpington and Australope lay every other day at best.

- Wyndottes, Buff Orpington, Speckled Sussex, plus Black Star (not as personable as my others but good layers). 31 birds in all. 26 eggs per day.

We cull our chickens in the fall of their second year after the new crop of chicks which we get in July from Murray McMurray have started to lay. We use straw in the nest boxes, sawdust from a friend on the floor, access to grass and other greens from spring to freeze up, and trim from the store when it is available. If any of the trim is big, I chop it in the Cuisinart and they scarf it. We clean the coop often in warmer weather but don't have a problem with ammonia when the litter is frozen so in winter we use the deep litter method.

- The Silkie chicken seems to have the most loving nature and

gives the highest quality egg -which is nice and small. I've got mixes of those -And if you let one of them set on the nest in winter she will keep the eggs warm and from freezing.

Thanks so much to everyone who took the time to respond. Your emails were fun to read and helpful - I've changed the timing on my light for example so that they awaken earlier and go to sleep with the natural setting of the sun.

I'll end with the most inspirational message I received in my quest for more eggs during the cold snap.

Be thankful- for the incredible sweetness of a hen- who will give you one egg every other day in this terrible weather!

I've read that in 1930 the average hen laid 93 eggs a year -in 1950 174-and 1983 224-now about 300. For me it's not about amount -its about quality -its about the sweetness and great loving between the species

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